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# ALTRUISM WAS VOLKSGEIST - A FOLK BELIEF IN ANCIENT TAMILAGAM

Dr. K. Murugan & P. Basith Assarani

Altruism is the principle or practice of concern for the welfare of others. It is a traditional virtue in many cultures and a fundamental characteristic of various religious traditions and secular worldviews. The word was coined by the French philosopher Auguste Comte in French as *altruisme*<sup>1</sup> and it was derived from Latin word *alteri* meaning "other people" or "somebody else"<sup>2</sup>. The term altruism may also refer to an ethical doctrine that claims that individuals are morally obliged to benefit others. Altruism can be defined as an individual performing an action which benefits another third-party individual either directly or indirectly without the expectation of reciprocity or reward for that action. Steinberg define altruism is "intentional and voluntary actions that aim to enhance the welfare of another person in the absence of any quid pro quo external rewards"<sup>3</sup>. All of the world's religions promote altruism as a very important moral value, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism and Sikhism, etc., place precise importance on altruistic morality. The concept has a long history in philosophical and ethical thought.

*Volksgeist* is a German word literary meaning for that is "spirit of the people" or "National character", for a unique spirit possessed collectively by each people or nation. Hegel coined the term *Volksgeist* in 1801. The influence of the idea in German thought comes from Montesquieu and Voltaire, i.e. from the Age of Enlightenment. Johann Gottfried Herder used the idea as a way of encouraging German-speaking peoples to forge a national and cultural identity. *Volksgeist* means folk or national spirit is perhaps the best known of a family of terms referring to sets of mental, intellectual, moral, and cultural traits that define particular human groups represented as being nations or peoples. The purport of this paper is to carve out the selflessness courageous of the Tamil society with special reference to hero-stones. Hero-Stones were contemporary source material available in villages or hamlets and in some places worshipped by the common folk, considered as a primary source to construct or reconstruct one's own regional history.

History can't be written without the consideration of the lengthy list of heroes with heroic actions, those personalities who risked and sacrificed their lives to try to save or protect the lives of others. Every society in this world has its own brave history and the erection of memorials in honour of that brave man or woman, who died in a brave or heroic action, is common phenomenon in all civilizations. These memorials took different forms in different countries and in different ages. Though the area has been dealt by few scholars with marginalised information, no comprehensive attempt has been made covering all aspects relating to the message convey by hero-stones. In Tamil Nadu, the erection of memorials gets its stable foot from the megalithic culture. Sangam bards speak about the rituals for erecting hero-stones as memorials.

Hero-stones were considered as a primary source to study the different aspects of common people's life and culture, their mode of warfare, dress, ornaments, hair style, weapons, animals and to a certain extent their habits, customs, beliefs and languages etc. It was usually divided into three panels, but some of them could be labelled occasionally under four or five panels depending on the event. The upper panel depicts the subject worshipping a deity, the middle panel depicts the hero, and the lower panels describe the battle scenes. They often carry inscriptions displaying the variety of adornments, including decorations and figures on carved stone. The carved inscription of hero-stones speaks about the heroic actions of warriors, the battle, the name of king and those who involved in those heroic actions. Hero-stones were erected usually for honouring the warriors and individuals who lost or sacrifice their lives for the sake of a king, country, society etc., They are usually in the form of a stone monument called as planted stones and denoting as 'natukal' or 'Veerakal' in Tamil language. *Natu* means 'plant', *kal* means 'stone' *Vera* means 'hero' in Tamil language. *Natukal* or *Veerakal* is the combination of these two tamil words. Most of the Hero-Stones found in TamilNadu were raised in the memory of heroes died in the heroic actions. The stones were erected to commemorate the death of heroes in



Vetchi battles and Karanthai battles. Tamil chieftains and soldiers wear *Ixora coccinea* flower, which is called as Vetchi flower in Tamil language, while invading a country and the soldiers will go in to the border areas and steal the cattle. In the Karanthai battle, the Tamil chieftains and soldiers wear *Sphaeranthus indicus*/Sphaeranthus hirstus flower, which is called as Karanthai flower in Tamil and defend against invasion and cattle raid.

One of the earliest hero-stones of Pandyas found at Vellalankottai on the Kayattar-Kazhugumalai Road in Tuticorin district. It was erected in the memory of father and son who killed a tiger. The hero-stone has carvings of the father and son, standing on either side of the tiger armed with weapons. There is a three-line inscription in Tamil vatteluttu above the figures datable to eighth century. The 2.5-feet tall hero-stone is called by the local folk as kaduvakkal meaning a "tiger stone." The script reads "Peruraaliyar Sentan-Kannan Kannan-Kovanun thozha-i-puli kalaaitu-p-pattar means that the two heroes, Senthann Kannan and his son Kannan Kovan, residents of Peruraali village killed the tiger. "This is one of the earliest hero-stones of the Pandya Naadu, with vatteluttu script. The Peruraali village mentioned in the inscription is probably the Perali located near Virudhunagar. Such stones erected to celebrate heroes who killed tigers have been found at Mottakkal in the Chengam region in northern Tamil Nadu. The erection of hero-stones was a custom in south India since the Iron Age, circa 1000 BCE to circa 600 BCE. Tamil Nadu witnessed a proliferation of such monuments during the Iron Age. These monuments included menhirs. Menhirs are tall, majestic monolithic stone slabs planted in memory of the dead. Hero-stones with Tamil-Brahmi script of the fourth century BCE, have been found at Pulimaankombai and Thathapatti villages, near Batlagundu town. "However, memorial stones are more visible in the Dharmapuri and Chengam regions from fifth century CE<sup>4</sup>. Illavelangal is a small village about 40 km from Tirunelveli, on the Tirunelveli Puliampatti, Kadambur road in Tamil Nadu. The village stands testimony to the worship of hero-stones in the Pandimandala through the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Illavelangal with its hero stones and Jain Tirthankaras will fascinate history and culture aficionados. The ten hero-stones are there to honor heroic soldiers who sacrificed their lives

on ancient war fields for their country. The portrayal of the heroes is interesting - they have bows, swords and shields and they are battling soldiers on horseback. Next to a slain hero, two women are depicted garlanding the departed brave soldiers. The images of the Jain Tirthankaras, which are in front of the Karuppasamy temple, quite a few black stones shaped like lingas in the temple. These stones stand as proud symbols of the martyrdom and sacrifice of the olden day heroes for their motherland.

A team of archaeologists attached to Tirupur-based Virarajendran Archaeological and Historical Research Centre has discovered a hero stone, which is estimated to be nearly 800-years-old while carrying out exploration along the river banks. It was erected for a person who died fighting horses belonging to a cavalry from neighbouring territory that invaded the village. The memorial was found near a river bank at Karadipatti hamlet situated on the border of Tirupur and Karur districts. "This is a rare sculpture for a 'hero' who died fighting horses trained for combating people after the chieftain and his cavalry from the neighbouring territory invaded to loot the resources in the said village. "Majority of the hero stones across the State are erected to commemorate the heroes of the respective villages who lost their lives fighting carnivorous animals while protecting the cattle of the area and a few others have been for those who died fighting people who tried to steal cattle". The engraved picture on 135-cm-tall and 80-cm-wide hero stone reveals that the horse was kicking the hero on his hip and bites his upper body. "Since inscriptions were absent on the stone, the age of the stone has been inferred from other archaeological evidences like the hero's attire, design of the ornaments and ear rings worn, decoration of the dress on lower part of the body, the style of saddle on the horse and few other supplementary proof obtained from the site that belong to a particular era"<sup>5</sup>. A hero stone of 17<sup>th</sup> century discovered with Tamil inscriptions from a village S Kumarapalayam 25 km from the hosiery town of Tirupur. A study further revealed that the stone must have been erected for a hero, who died during an encounter with a tiger to save cattle in the village. On hearing the story, villagers came forward and built a temple for the hero stone<sup>6</sup>.



Five hero-stones believed to have belonged to the Pallava period, dating back nearly 1,400 years, were discovered in Puliyanur village, bordering Vellore, Tiruvannamalai and Krishnagiri districts by Professor Appasamy Murugaiyan of Paris University and R Poongundran, a retired assistant director of State Department of Archaeology. Two of the five stones discovered were damaged while three had inscriptions and pictorial depictions. Over 1,000 hero-stones have been discovered in the Thenpennai river basin so far, especially in Tirupattur, Tiruvannamalai and Dharmapuri region. The Thenpennai river basin in Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri districts during the Pallava period would have been land fit for cattle-grazing and it was common for villagers and small kingdoms to fight over cattle ownership. These stones belong to Pallava and Naickar periods are believed to be 400 years to 1,400 years old. Some of these stones have inscriptions on how the heroes were killed in battle<sup>7</sup>.

From time immemorial the Tamil people followed the tradition of erecting hero-stones for those who sacrificed their lives for the sake of their kings and kingdom, and also the heroic actions of the individuals in the battlefield, pig hunting, snake killing etc., A hero-stone of Ayyappadeva from Reddiyur in Uthangarai taluk of Krishnagiri district recorded that one Aryakutti, servant of Idusappaiyar of Venadu lost his life in pig hunting. The hero-stones found in Kundani region, which is located 22kms away from Krishnagiri, are unique in type called Navakanda sculptures. Navakandam means nine cuts, "nava" means nine and "kandam" is colloquial tamil word which means piece. A heroic soldier ritually cuts himself in nine places and dies in front of their deities for the welfare and success of the king and kingdom in a war, was a great patriotic action. The people who had sacrificed their lives for the sake of their country are honoured by the Tamils. Jeyamkondar refers self-immolation in his renowned work 'Kalingathu Parani'. The sangam bard Tolkappiam speaks about 'Avipali' in which 'avi' is a derivation of the tamil word 'aavi', which means soul and 'pali' means immolation, or self-sacrifice by warriors. Manimekalai also speaks about these human sacrifices. Maravars of TamilNadu and Nayars of Kerala practiced this as a ritual. "Vairavi", a community in Madurai also adopted this practice where they were always ready to sacrifice their

lives for any noble cause in those centuries<sup>8</sup>. Hero-stones also consider as a primary source material in the process of constructing and reconstructing of one's own regional native history.

Nolambas had their hegemony over Krishnagiri district from 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup> was characterised by the erection of many hero-stones in this region. They are the pioneers for honouring their subjects for their brave patriotic actions. From time immemorial, whether it is to express one's supreme love for gods, kings and lords, people have sacrificed their lives. The Ancient society was deeply bound with the Social Welfare Theory. Therefore, the self-sacrifice was considered as noblest of all sacrifices, but most martyrs sacrificed their life for a social cause they espoused or for the welfare of their benefactors.

Mahendra Nolamba was succeeded by his son Ayyappadeva. A hero-stone erected during his period speaks about the battle between Gangas and Nolambas<sup>10</sup>. Ayyappadeva was succeeded by his son Anniga also known as Bira Nolamba. A hero-stone found in the Muthanur Village of Krishnagiri district speaks about his ascendancy to the throne in the year 923 AD<sup>11</sup>. Nolambas had become subordinates of Rashtrakutas during his region. An incident of cattle raid is mentioned on a hero-stone of the fifteenth year of Bira Nolamba from Periabompatti in the Uthangarai taluk of Krishnagiri district<sup>12</sup>. According to the inscription on the hero-stone, Sekathur Manikkadayanar lost his life in an attempt to recapture the cattle which was raided by the enemies. Another hero-stone of the same year of Bira Nolamba at the same place speaks about the death of a hero with his servants when he recaptured the cattle which were raided by Mamandayan, the ruler of Sevathur.

Hero-stones were erected not only to the heroes who lost their lives in the battle fields of cattle raids and also for those who lost their lives in some adventurous actions. For instance, a hero-stone of Ayyappadeva's regime from Reddiyur in Uthangarai taluk of Krishnagiri district speaks about one Arayakutti, servant of Idusappaiyar of Venadu who lost his life in pig hunting. A hero-stone found at Gangavaram belonging to the 25<sup>th</sup> regnal year of Rajendra Chola recorded the death of Kamundan of



Bangalanadu for the possession of cattle. Yellinadu refers to modern Krishnagiri region and Bangalanadu refers to modern Vellore region. This epigraphical source confirmed that these conflicts for the possession of cattle were regular in those times in these regions<sup>13</sup>. Hera Hodahalli inscription in Harur taluk speaks about this conflict for cattle raids<sup>14</sup>. Rajadhirajan I ruled over Chola Empire for thirty six years from 1018 to 1054 A.D. six inscriptions belong to this ruler have been discovered from Krishnagiri district. From these inscriptions we came to know that he was referred as Vijayarajendiran. A damaged hero-stone belong to the period of Rajadhirajan I found at Kattadikuppam in Krishnagiri taluk mentions the name of the village as "Vijayarajendira Mandalathi Aeilnattunelayur"<sup>15</sup>.

Kundani is located in Hosur taluk of Krishnagiri district. It was the capital of Vira Ramanatha, the Hoysala king during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. A unique type of hero-stones was found in this region called Navakanda sculptures. Some of them are preserved in the Dharmapuri Government Museum. One of the hero-stones of Navakanda type depicts that a hero cut the head of another soldier and fled away on a horse back. This sculpture is said to be the period of the king Chikpamithalwan, son of Mallapurvathirajan. In a sculpture at Kundani, it is depicted that a soldier cut the head of another soldier and handed over it to another soldier who kept it in a basket and fled away on a horse back. This awful scene depicted in this sculpture revealed the historic fact that Saktham<sup>16</sup>, a unique kind of female goddess 'sakthi' worship of beheading human beings to please God was prevalent in Kundani region during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and from another inscriptions, it was established that

Madam in Krishnagiri District.

Altruism can be distinguished from feelings of loyalty, because the loyalty is predicated upon relationships, altruism does not consider relationships. The theory of psychological egoism suggests that no act of sharing, helping or sacrificing can be described as truly altruistic, as the actor may receive an intrinsic reward in the form of personal gratification. The validity of this argument depends on whether intrinsic rewards qualify as "benefits". The hero-stones heroes might not be expecting the reward or benefit in any forms.

The availability of Hero Stones in this region speaks about the selfless courage of the Tamil society. The sati stones and the hero stones of individuals also illuminated the virtues and valour of the Tamil Society. To illuminate the past glorious of our region, an in-depth research study and the preservation of our ancient historical monuments is essential one. Altruism or selflessness is the principle or practice of concern for the welfare of others. It is a traditional virtue in TamilNadu. Some villagers have destroyed these hero-stones when untoward incidents or natural calamities occurred. Superstitions and a lack of awareness are the cause of a wealth of information about the ancient people being lost. Despite being a great source of material for historic studies, the hero stones found in various parts of Tamil Nadu face threat due to lack of care and maintenance. They lie abandoned and neglected in many parts of the state. Even though some experts have documented them, their preservation is still marginalised one.

## Notes & References

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6. Villagers construct temple for seventh century hero stone in Tiruppur, The Times of India, Chennai, Dated January 16, 2017.
7. Pallava Era 'Hero Stones' found in Tamil Nadu, The Indian Express, Dated, September 30, 2014.



Yelinadu during the conflict with the people of Bangalanadu for the possession of cattle. Yeltnadu refers to modern Krishnagiri region and Bangalanadu refers to modern Vellore region. This epigraphical source confirmed that these conflicts for the possession of cattle were regular in those times in these regions<sup>13</sup>. Hera Hodahalli inscription in Harur taluk speaks about this conflict for cattle raids<sup>14</sup>. Rajadhirajan I ruled over Chola Empire for thirty six years from 1018 to 1054 A.D. six inscriptions belong to this ruler have been discovered from Krishnagiri district. From these inscriptions we came to know that he was referred as Vijayarajendiran. A damaged hero-stone belong to the period of Rajadhirajan I found at Kattadikuppam in Krishnagiri taluk mentions the name of the village as "Vijayarajendira Mandalathi Aeilnattunelayur"<sup>15</sup>.

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similar practice was in vogue at Panneswarar Madam in Krishnagiri District.

Altruism can be distinguished from feelings of loyalty, because the loyalty is predicated upon relationships, altruism does not consider relationships. The theory of psychological egoism suggests that no act of sharing, helping or sacrificing can be described as truly altruistic, as the actor may receive an intrinsic reward in the form of personal gratification. The validity of this argument depends on whether intrinsic rewards qualify as "benefits". The hero-stones heroes might not be expecting the reward or benefit in any forms.

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